

Open Air Bedding by a Tudor House Replica:
China's Contemporaneous Construction of Tradition and Modernity

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This paper is part of a larger collection of essays in progress, *The 2nd Coming of Capital in China: A Philosophical and Photographic Critique*, a sequel to my *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed* (Routledge, 2016). The 1st coming originates in the rise of British industrial capitalism and its colonial domination of the world. While post WW 2 decolonization results in the formation of postcolonial nation-states, the post-Cold War and post-Tiananmen crackdown has secured an American hegemony of global capitalism. If the 1st coming of capital rules through conquest, the 2nd coming apparently governs by persuasion and consent. In the case of the People's Republic of China, it means the welcoming return of a political economy it once rejects with resolution.

China's enthusiastic embrace of capital follows the fundamental logic in what Joseph Schumpeter aptly describes seven decades ago as "creative destruction." As the engine of economic growth is driven by its constant need for self-reproduction, capital operates by turning the present into a past, the old into the new. It is this alternation of planned obsolescence and artificial renewal that sustains the life of capital in an endless cycle of boom and bust. While the relatively recent flourish of Chinese market economy has its undeniable special characteristics, given its socialist history, the exponential growth in the production of commodities and services does not seem to deviate from the pattern of "creative (de)construction," if we adopt Schumpeter's term with a slight modification. China's innovative remaking of its image both intra- and inter-nationally depends on a willful demolition and construction of its rural and urban geography. Such (de)construction essentially reiterates the historical antecedents of Western capitalist development in terms of land enclosure, rural migration into cities, industrialization and urbanization. What makes this process distinct is the historically unprecedented speed as well as the simultaneity with which China (de)constructs its "tradition" and "modernity."

A few words about the historical meanings of "tradition" and "modernity" seem in order before our examination of the particular cases of their Chinese (de)construction. The Sino-centric view of Chinese tradition suffered an irrecoverable loss when the Qing dynasty lost the world's first war against drugs to the British Amada. Oceanic industrial capitalism from the West defeated a land-locked China in its 1st coming. This was the age of European

imperialism whose global military, industrial, and technological hegemony was widely perceived as modernity's triumph over tradition. With Edward Said's groundbreaking work, an academic postcolonialism arose to question an Orientalist discourse, which, in dividing the world spatially and spherically, also relegated temporally the East and the rest to a tradition overcome by a Western modernity (1979). In this trajectory of linear progress, the West has been positioned to stand for the present as well as the future of world history. It is not that the West has no tradition, but its tradition is believed to have a sovereign existence. It both stands apart from other world historical currents and sustains itself thorough an uninterrupted evolution from Greek antiquity to American modernity. This Orientalist framework is a material condition to which post-Opium War Chinese history has to respond. Mao's communist revolution against the 1st coming of capitalism and colonialism and against Chinese feudalism itself cannot transcend this conceptual and material history. Neither will our investigation of the zigzag revision of Chinese tradition and modernity entirely escape its constraints.

For this study, we shall embrace the postcolonial understanding that historical developments have their inevitable imbrication, whether it is between the West and West, or the North and the South. We shall also avail ourselves of Eric Hobsbawm & Terrance Rainer's insight that what is presented as "tradition" is often a modern "invention." Traditions are rarely age-old hand-downs from a knowable past but rather more contemporary concoctions. They come about in response to rapid social changes and serve largely the needs of the powerful in soliciting the consent of the powerless for a cultural unity, conducive both to state discipline and capitalist development. Since economy in the 2nd coming of capitalism is the *raison d'être* of nation-states globally, any scrutiny of the dialectic of tradition and modernity entails a critical look at the roles of state and capital, as well as the no less significant subjects of their governance.

The look is literal: I select images from my decade old archive of street photography in China to show the infra-structural transformation, compression, and collision of the old and the new. The look is also critical: I deploy interdisciplinary knowledge in my training as a cultural studies scholar to ascertain and analyze the significances my photographic documents present. Because this intellectual exercise involves my autobiography as a naturalized Chinese American, whose life experience straddles a China in its pre-reform Mao era and an America after the Reagan/Thatcher/Deng Xiaoping revolution, my reading of contemporary China necessarily reflects an understanding of history's palimpsest and the

East and West negotiation of meaning in the age of global capitalism. With the perspective of a participant observer at once objectively removed and subjectively engaged, I spotlight the massive makeover in China's built environment, visible beyond belief. With the recorded sights of monuments and museums, streets, highways, and alleyways as a window, I also try to discern the hidden "mental life" of the people, manifest in their everyday practice (Simmel; De Certeau). Although the simultaneous (de)construction of tradition and modernity in China is state controlled and market disseminated, it is too appropriated by Chinese subjects, be they citizens or consumers, to make sense of its radical reconstitution of peoples and places in their own city and country.

I. Confucius Hall (2012)



f.1.1



f.1.2

The ancient philosopher and political theorist, Kongzi/Confucius (551-479 B.C.), is a very much maligned and eulogized figure in Chinese history. In the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), he is dismissed and critiqued for his feudalistic and hierarchical ideas about society and self. In the post-Mao age of Chinese reform (1976-1988), he is again blamed for China's historical inwardness and backwardness, notably in *River Elegy*, an independently produced mini TV series, sanctioned and shown on state televisions in 1988. This is before the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown of spontaneous mass democracy movement, which has unexpectedly yet effectively enabled the central government's whole scale capitalistic development without popular resistance. In those years of "cultural fever," the worldview of Confucius is alleged to have perpetuated an insular and ethnocentric China to actively engage the "oceanic culture" of the West, leading

to its defeat in the Opium Wars (1839-42; 1856-60) and the collapse of the Manchu Empire (1836-1911).



f.1.3



f.1.4

The construction of Confucius Hall in the first decade of the 21st century in Guiyang is both the municipal and provincial governments' initiated tourist enterprise as well as the Chinese communist party's enterprise in moral education (f. 1.1-1.3). The size of the standing Confucius statue on the open platform leading to the memorial hall easily dwarfs any statue of Mao in his lifetime, while the sitting Confucius bronze inside it appears to top the marble figure of Mao at his mausoleum in Tiananmen Square (f. 1.1-1.2). The magnitude of such sculptural representation of Confucius seems merely indicative of his symbolic significance at different levels of the contemporary Chinese governments. Notably, this latest expression from the cycle of sage condemnation to veneration is not an exclusive national(istic) state project. The domestic reinstatement of Confucius is contemporaneously a transnational affair, realized in the worldwide establishment and installation of Confucius Institutes to disseminate Chinese language and culture (1.4). The resurrection of Chinese tradition from its ancient past is simultaneously a reaching out to the West on both Atlantic and Pacific shores. The (de)construction of Confucius is a two-pronged state strategy. It augments the commodity shipping overseas with the global spread of Chinese cultural heritage: not only are we dressing you from head to toe, but we are trying to fill your head, too. This packaging of Confucius as a civilizational ambassador to the world at large, one must note, follows the academic promulgation of "Confucian capitalism" by diasporic Chinese intellectuals in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Tu et al.; Yao). The economic rise of China is in need of a cultural justification for its ruling elites today very much like what theoretically justified the rise of the "little dragons" of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and

South Korea in the 1970s. Similar to Max Weber's rationalization of "protestant ethic" for European industrial capitalism of the 19th century, a culturally distinctive Chinese capitalism has to be invented.

But the domestic and often times nationalistic appropriation of Confucius only succeeds the historically unparalleled mass migration of rural Chinese labor into old cities and new urban centers with the consequential disintegration of a historically continuous form of extended family structure. Amid the nucleation of family, upsurge of money worship, and individualization of the self, it is small wonder that the figure of Confucius as an embodiment of ageless wisdom and social stability has to experience its contemporary exoneration and monumentalization (f. 1.2, f. 1.3). Here Confucianism is revamped both as a state discourse of "Harmonious Society" and a private ethical revival of a way of life ineluctably eroded by market values. Unlike the American Dream of old whose democratic underpinnings have been dissolved since Reaganomics took over, the "Chinese Dream" of President and paramount leader Xi Jinping's still hinges on an apparent moral mandate. Confucian aphorism of ancient China certainly comes handy: "Educate the citizenry on the virtue of love; no love is better than filial piety. Educate the citizenry to respect order; no order is better than respect for your senior and elder" (f. 1.3). It is as though reiteration of tradition from the communist leaders running an efficient capitalist economy is able both to sustain their rule and stall the ruthless forces of avarice and social disruption.

This inventive use of tradition in state and public discourse is accompanied by an upswing of a quasi-religious Confucianism, when its original reverence of learning is the base of an individual instrumentality. Here in the temple of Confucius, the gilded sage/saint has gained a new life, having been pieced together from the rubbles long abandoned by the Red Guards, sitting high the pedestal along with his famous disciples. A mother and her daughter are kowtowing to the newly minted deities that used to, in China's dynastic times, bestow their power on the scholars who wish to pass the imperial exams and enter officialdom (f.1.5). This time, they seek blessings for success in a post-Mao Zedong educational system that is not about revolution but technocratic competence in market competition. Parents who have not yet fully transformed themselves in the emerging culture of capitalism still believe in living their lives vicariously through their offspring. Thus, they gather material resources large or meager to shepherd their children through a rat race from elementary school to college, if affordable. In the absence of royal lineage, prayers to the Confucian cohorts of learned deities still hold promise. The passage through a

complex of tests and exams at various stages of a student's life reveals itself as measures of meritocracy, regardless of widely acknowledged leadership birthright for some. The passage supposedly also ensures the future citizen of the "new-era" nation of his or her upward mobility.

Outside the temple of learning are vendors selling red blank good-wish cards to be hung on chain-link fences. Red is the auspicious color of good fortune. The message on the card in the center of the photo below exemplifies the kind of wishes expressed: "Name: My name is Cai Yiming. Wish: I hope to improve my studies in the three years of high school. Pass the exams to enter a good university. Have good health and have my wishes fulfilled" (f.1.6)



f.1.5



f.1.6

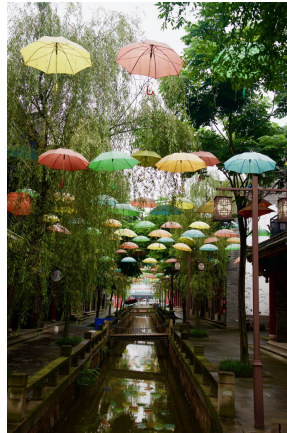
II. Thames Town (2006)

The Confucian revival through modern memorial form and ancient temple structure is concurrent with another mode of development, this time, new towns erected expeditiously on former farmland. This includes not only the (de)construction of villages and fairgrounds in a bygone Chinese style but also Western landmark townships and buildings made in China. Here, we have an example of an ancient longevity town, completed and open for business in 2012 at the outskirts of Chongqing. An exiting visitor will not only see the town gate's classic Chinese roof-ridge angling towards the sky, but s/he shall also spot through its frame Hong Kong style apartment towers across the street: stylistic antiquity is stacked upon stylistic modernity in their unabashed simultaneity. The centenarians that have given the site its development value are no longer seen in the village. The Chinese bamboo hats and straw thatched raincoats, prominent in classic watercolor on

rice paper and still visible in the period of Mao's modernization, have vanished without a trace, too functional to be dusted-off and polished. In their stead, Sherlock Holmes' fashion umbrellas are multi-colored and multi-culturalized, hovering beautifully over a running brook with concrete bottoms. In the actually existing Chinese villages, only the old and young remain as the strong-armed men and nimble-handed women swarm to the cities to stitch your Levi jeans and scaffold both Chinese modernity and tradition (f.2.1; 2.2; 2.3).



f.2.1



f.2.2



f.2.3

Besides engineering ready-to-wear ancient Chinese towns and overnight global metropolis, we too have an imitation Paris outside of the City of Hangzhou and an avatar of Jackson Hole, Wyoming at the edge of Beijing. "Sky Capital City" outside the ancient garden city of Suzhou boasts a duplicate of the Parisian Pont Alexandre III with a scaled-down Eiffel Tower as well as a clone of the London's Bridge, featuring not two towers but four. These new Chinese urban and suburban developments in western form are much larger in size than miniature city symbols in "The World Park" in Beijing or "The Window of the World" in the southern city of Shenzhen. While amusement architecture in "The World Park" serves the need of local tourism of compressed global sights, "See the World in 24 Hours" as its ad-line goes, the construction of Western-styled township has its objective to manufacture Chinese demands for high-end real estate. Build it and they will come, and sell it with signs of Western wealth and social status made in China. What used to be the object of proletarian denunciation in Mao's communist era is now posh and hot. The symbolic capital of Europe and the U.S. is harnessed to yield economic profit for the investors. Old Western decadence has acquired a new Chinese panache.

While the profit motive may not necessarily translate into realized gain at least for now, the booming "ghost towns" in their fresh sheen do reveal the miscalculation of Chinese

venture capitalism for a quick buck.¹ The case in point is “Thames Town,” another instant city completed in 2006, designed by the architectural firm of Atkins in UK and financially backed by Songjiang New City Construction and Development and Shanghai Henghe Real Estate. It is (de)constructed on agricultural soil that used to belong to the county of Shongjiang, now a district of the mega-metropolis of Shanghai with a subway line connecting both for easy commute.



f.2.4



f.2.5

Going beyond the gated and sentineled entrance of Thames Town, manned by a guard in British uniform without the bearskin is the Total Fitness club, fronted with a non-functional phone booth (f. 2.4). No communication of the Alexander Bell kind will take place there. The decorative red phone does connect visually and spatially with the gym to suggest a modernized British lifestyle for its professional managerial class, after which their Chinese counterparts aspire. The rise of the fitness regime is a rather recent social practice even in the West. In developing China, it consigns physical labor to the exclusive domain of the rural migrants or local peasants who actually put the suburban town together. It is that traditional agrarian labor which also builds the *Blade Runner* edifices of the Shanghai financial district, where the fresh fitness class targeted by the Thames Town venture is expected to tone their heart and limb muscles, otherwise atrophying within their cubicles and in front of their computer screens (f. 2.3).

The division of labor and the differentiation of class and culture are also visible on the main street of Thames Town with its Tudor style buildings anchoring the corner (f 2.5). Not surprisingly, the occupants of the eye-catching buildings are real estate agents. Playing the role of an “overseas Chinese buyer,” I was able to tour a few of the many vacant condo

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2015/jul/23/shanghai-china-european-style-ghost-towns-in-pictures>

and townhouse units and learned their market value. At my visit in the spring of 2011, the per square foot cost in Thames Town is equivalent to that of mid-size U.S. cities, while the medium income of the salaried class in Shanghai is roughly less than a quarter of their American counterparts. No wonder the street traffic is sparse, betokening the kind of country leisure to which the owners of those speculative properties can potentially escape. Yet, uncongested as is, the means of transportation cannot but mirror the latest economic, technological, and social change. Just a couple of decades ago, the dominant vehicle of conveyance over China was the bicycle. Though bicycle is not obsolete even in Shanghai, purportedly the most modern city in 1930s Asia and now vying prestige with that of Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Singapore, it is absent in Thames town (f. 3.7). The young man in the middle of the street, apparently a carrier of some sort, is on a motorized scooter, defying traffic rules as many city dwellers do, outnumbered by the business people in their dent-free and paint-fresh cars.

The reproduction and transplantation of Tudor architecture, however, cannot ensure the reproduction of a British way of life that has evolved through a much slower process of historical change. What modernization of the West has taken place in three centuries is arguably accomplished in China within three decades. The express cities that spring up since the radical political and economic reform after the Tiananmen massacre have made the predominantly rural Chinese population a thing of the not so distant past. The People's Republic presently has a majority urban demography. The overnight (de)construction of conventional cities and suburban towns like Thames Town cannot, however, but retain everyday habits and practices in what appears an outdated age. The black grids of the imitation Tudor House are not the exposed wooden frames that give the building its real structural support (f.2.5; 2.6). Instead, they are superficial and ornamental, emblematic of the entire Thames Town project of surface simulation. The heart of residential living lies literally in the quilts hanging out to air, basking in natural solar energy (f.2.6.; 3.7). I overheard a Brit visitor commenting to his Chinese girlfriend as they walked by on how incongruous the sight was. In the academic language of the West, the sunning of comforters in public sight is deemed incompatible with modern duplicates of Tudor housing. It reflects "the contradiction of tradition and modernity," specific to the so-called catching-up modernities of the rest.



f.2.6



f.2.7

Of great puzzle are the kinds of phenomena, both architecturally and artistically pronounced and anthropically particular in the West, which somehow manages to escape “contradiction” and “incongruity.” I think of Koi ponds in suburban American backyards, Thermoplastic elastomer (TPE) yoga mats rolled out on your carpeted floor, and that ubiquitous stone Buddha atop a plastic tube facilitated dripping fountain, greeting your guests at the front door. Such similar appropriations of cultural symbols and practices other than originally your own are not regarded as retrograde in the Western context of modernity. Perhaps this post-hippie counterculture turned new age is merely a hollow echo of *Chinoiserie* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when industrial capitalism has not quite enchanted and enthralled the world and the Orient still solicits with its decorative charm. Then and now a benevolent Orientalism gives the imperial power of the West its “positional superiority” in Said’s memorable phrase. From Monet’s lily pond to the adoring French Maoists, or their cinematic representation in Jean-luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* seems an encompassing Western tradition of historical continuity without contradiction. Deracinated from their homelands, transplanted across the Pacific Ocean or the Himalayan foothills, the ancient and still perceptible cultural practices of the East can be seamlessly incorporated into a forward-looking Western modernity, Deepak Chopra-ed as it were.

James Clifford characterizes this interaction the results of “traveling cultures.” Culture is by nature restless and mobile, always refusing to stand still, always en route somewhere else through exploration, colonization, capitalist expansion and the list goes on. The social spaces where cultures meet thus constitute a “contact zone,” in the Mary Louise Pratt’s delineation on imperial conquest. For her the sites of cultural collision and

accommodation are never free of an asymmetrical relationship of power, however. Contemporary Chinese Anglophilia and classic European Chinoiserie are not quite equivalent translations and transplantations.

If modernity is an accumulation of traversed world cultural forms and practices, does the West have exclusive ownership? Isn't this presumptive proprietorship dictating the terms of a contradictory Chinese tradition and modernity? The open airing of beddings and laundries appears a Chinese residual cultural practice that is at odds with an "advanced" capitalist modernity, washer and heat dried (f. 2.6; 3.7). It is in the normative judgment of this West originated and now globalized modernity that the Chinese development is contradictory, imitative, and thus inauthentic. However, as soon as we look at the historical process of Western modernization that has evened out its older human dependence on solar energy, we realize that the contradiction is perhaps not in the recent and rapid Chinese capitalist modernization. Rather, it is within a modernity that has been fossil fueled its way recklessly forward towards ecological extinction.

In the logic of this West-led and worldwide-spread modernity, the solution to a technological problem and its disastrous aftermath has to be the birth of a new technology, a new growth industry to overcome the threat of species death and ecological collapse. This faith in the redemptive power of technology is in fact consistent with the nature of capitalist culture, i.e. its helpless compulsion towards "creative destruction." We already know the effects of the fossil fueled destruction through climate change, despite Trump Inc.'s constant denial. We also know manufactured risk is also an artificial business opportunity. Thus, creativity is pouring into "innovative technologies" and "carbon trading," that shall keep the cycle of boom and bust in perpetuity. In the unfailing supply of market miracles, it is believed that there is and never shall be tipping points or doomsdays. It is this consistency of faith without reason that is at the heart of industrial modernity, its inherent contradiction extended from the 1st coming of capital to the 2nd. It is capital's desire for endless growth that spells its helpless death wish.

I am not saying that we should not harvest solar energy, neither am I denying the fact that China is the leading producer of solar panels. Rather than examining its own non-competitive performance, US industries of the same are charging Chinese producers and their state backing with unfair trading practices. Does ecology require an economy of national competition rather than transnational collaboration? The obdurate resistance of the Trump administration to sign onto the Paris agreement, of which China is a willing party

and a measurably significant player, highlights another contradiction within a global modernity that is still caught in the trappings of medieval tribalism and vitriolic nationalism. While this contradiction between global economy and national interest is beyond the scope of this essay, let us return to the quilts under a winter sun on site in Thames Town. We shall remind ourselves of the fact that those laundered flags of residual China are still flying high in Shanghai's many apartment-towers-express and the humble Shikumen (石库门) or stone vault style housing, looking up to the smoggy sky of London's yesteryear.

The historical dependence on nature and its attendant habits are not contradictory to a trajectory of substantive and sustainable progress. The display of private and existential necessities ought to be publically acknowledged and collectively endorsed by a new world norm that truly cares about the health of the earth. In this line of thinking, the open airing of comforters is indeed in harmonious co-existence with the gingerbread surface of the Tudor house, just as harmonious as the laundries once hung around the servant quarters of the Tudor house in its homeland of the U.K.. In turning such harmony into incongruity, industrial capitalism has manufactured a progress of technological universality for profit making. While this universality and its compulsory conformity are creative-destructive at its core, the inherited and habituated practice of drying your clothing in the sun is conservational at heart.

This ancient lowbrow appropriation of solar energy is admittedly an accidental exception, contradictory to the ethos of consumption underlying the highbrow design of Thames Town. The tramcar come a food-vending caboose, on the other hand, is only contradictory in appearance (f. 2.7). The mixture of French and English lettering is semantically appropriate; "La Gare" means "Train Station," though the missing "I" in the "LIMITED" might speak of skipping a step on the ladder of global industrial capitalism. Isn't skipping a feature in China's simultaneous (de)construction of tradition and modernity with UNLIMITED possibilities? Isn't this simultaneity a distinctive Chinese model of "time/space compression" as ironic as an unprecedented capitalist development led by the world's most efficient nominal communist party or socialist state with Chinese characteristics (Harvey)? There is perhaps no contradiction because both Asian tradition and EuroAmerican modernity were contemporaneous historical constructs in the era of Western colonialism. They are at present governed by a unified logic of the market when everyday objects and practices are mere formal differences. The "La Gare" could sell "crepe," or "fish and chips." It

can also peddle, as the menu on the blackboard shows, “roast sausage, roast beef ball, roast squid ball” accompanied by “ice coffee, ice black tea, Coke, Sprite, and black plum juice.” Here, contradiction of culinary traditions is reconceived as harmonious hybridity; diverse food ways contact and interact in the free market of gastronomic cornucopia. After all, the appropriation of the foreign and the recuperation of the indigenous is Chairman Mao’s principal approach to Chinese tradition and Western modernity. Against his resolution of contradiction in the achievement of communism, the Omnivorian of the world does seem to unite in the liberalization of deprived taste buds. The caboose is a mere microcosm of booming food courts in Shanghai’s shopping malls and subway terminals, where multinational cuisine is on display and multicultural flavors tempt your nostrils.



f.2.8



f.2.9

The Thames Town experiment seems an innovative if not radically revisional use of Mao at a time when the communist and capitalist blocks were at loggerheads. In that Eastern world of equal opportunity poverty, the Mao Zedong thought on Chinese history and Western modernity remains committed to an unyielding ideological egalitarianism, however aberrant in reality. The current Chinese embrace of the foreign, read the West, is not merely of its form as in Thames Town’s architecture and layout. It is an acceptance of social stratification as well as the concentration of wealth. The ostentatiously wealthy and the wretchedly poor appear to deserve their own lots, just as people stateside who shop in Walmart or Wholefoods are said to be exercising their respective freedom of choice. The street shots on Shanghai’s Huaihai Road (f. 2.8) and Nanjing Road (f. 2.9) simply illustrate such contrast without contradiction. Not just the beggar under the flag of the People’s Republic amid the New Year festivities, Brad Pitt and Chanel #5 are now the standard

bearer of the hip and cool. The old lady rummaging through waste bin may be oblivious, but social distinction through brand consumption is prevalent for China's new middleclass, if not "inevitable" as Chanel's ad line shows. The Chinese subtitle underneath it is even more hyperbolic: Chanel is something that has "no substitution" (f. 2.9). It symbolizes China's inescapable destiny.

The cultural logic of differentiation on the market and its correspondent production of social status are at the core of both the manufacture of the Chinese past and the Chinese modern. An agrarian aristocracy China's modernizing socialism erased can now return in its post-socialist age with a vengeance, when the feudal past is performed in postmodern times as costuming (f. 2.9a; f. 2.9b).



f.2.9a



f. 2.9b

It is not quite a leap of faith: the Madame Tussauds' mode of fashioning can be adopted and re-fashioned in a provincial Chinese museum (f. 2.9a).² If the wax figures of celebrity cult can be simultaneously globalized and localized, when Michael Jordon stands side by side with Yao Ming, Bruce Lee with Angelina Jolie, they can also walk out from their mummified conjugal chamber into the alley of a historical and existing village, with their tour guide on the side (f. 2.9b). This is an actual village on the rim of Erhai in the old town of Dali, Yunnan Province, 800 km away from the museum in Guiyang, the city presently better known for its Confucian Hall and College of Confucian Studies (f. 1.1-1.3). Here, the jump from wax idealization to real coupledness seems without any historical hiccup, indicative of

² <https://www1.madametussauds.com/> It bears telling that among Merlin Entertainment's many Madame Tussauds' in the world, China has five: in Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, Wuhan, and Hong Kong.

China's contemporaneous (de)construction of traditional and modern marital conventions (f. 2.9 a, b, e, & f). Such practice of inventing culture shows a "coeval-ness" without contradiction, temporal or spatial (Fabian). The new museum model of matrimony indeed enlivens a new model of the Chinese unclear family. Though both couples in the museum and the alley are appareled in red, the revolutionary color symbolism in the Mao years (1949-1976) is reverted to the pre-revolutionary red of good fortunes and double happiness.

In this imagined cultural continuity between the pre-revolutionary red and the post-socialist red, though, is a glaring omission. It is as though Chinese history has flowed uninterrupted; the ideologically strident communist times from the 1950s' anti-rightist movements, the 1960s and 70s Cultural Revolution, to the 1980's bloodshed in Tiananmen Square with which the omnipotent party and the invisible hand usher in the capitalist reign have never existed, except perhaps for consumer comedy and kitsch (f. 3.8; 3.9; 3.9 a, b, & c). Besides this repressed public memory, the auspicious red resurrected on the lovebirds' clothes of old country gentry signal a present privatization and a rewiring of traditional psychological makeup. Call it the nucleation of affect and individualization of feelings, if you so will. The red no longer betokens the filial bliss any authentic Confucian would sourly miss. The ancestors of the couple's extended family are not nearby and the young couple's tourist good fortune is not being generationally shared. With a pair of dragon and phoenix attire in traditional red, the newly weds walk in a honeymoon movie of their own direction, the dresses barely covering their modern footwear of loafers and heels. Is this a posthumous realization of Mao's famous motto: "the Chinese can appropriate the foreign as they can appropriate their own past (洋为中用, 古为今用)"?

The red of the newly uniformed peasant from a nearby village, yet unenclosed by Thames Town, evokes the royal red of Queen Elizabeth's Guard. At a different age, those who stand at Buckingham, St. James Palaces, or the Windsor Castle would be the guards of Queen Victoria, who was partially responsible for the downfall of China's last dynasty. While the Manchu Empire lost its war against the drugs to the British Empire, the western power's goal of opening the Chinese market was nipped in the bud by Mao. With the in-flood of foreign investment today and the burgeoning of the domestic market, China has replaced the old time U.K. as "the factory of the world." As the supply of U.S. grains begins to substantially satisfy the Chinese demand in the WTO regime of transnational trade, the farmer is being de-commissioned. Some have become the multitude of construction labor

that builds the structures, ancient appearing and modern looking, while others are transformed into security guards, putting on the red-peaked British army cap to serve such Chinese owners of capital as Thames Town has envisioned.



f. 2.9c



f. 2.9d

While the actual royalty of the nouveau riche is yet to take full possession of the sumptuous residences there, the site is already swarmed with a special kind of tourists, who, in similar ways to those wearing lucky red wedding dress in the vanishing Chinese villages, are donning white suits and gowns, a symbolic purity originated from the descendants of the Caucasus, who have given capitalist modernity its particular historical whiteness (f. 2.9c; f. 2.9d). This reflective whiteness is not merely embodied by the young couple or enhanced by the reflective light shield at the corner under the arch. It is also echoed in the young man's posture, a near mirror image of the Winston Churchill bronze facsimile transported in form, as it were, from London's Parliamentary Square (f. 2.9d).

By coincident, the image of the original Churchill statue included here is shrouded in pale Luna light, while the one in Thames Town basks in bright sun light. Though proportionately smaller than the monumentalized Churchill in London, the young man's figure with its straight back and confident stand seems to impose himself upon Churchill's hunched back (f. 2.9c; f. 2.9d). One wonders if this is emblematic of the 2nd coming of capital: the sun of the British Empire has set in the West while the sun again rises in China. It is not Savior Mao Zedong this time. While the Helmsman entombed in the mausoleum is probably restless through the night, capital has annihilated space through time; history has reversed its course in the People's Republic of China as it does in the other former states of socialism on the Eastern block. Without contradiction, the Georgian style Christ Church of St. Ewen in Bristol should make its reappearance in Thames Town, China, conspicuously ensconced at

the center of the town square. Yet, St. Ewen in Songjiang is only as incongruous as Sir William Chambers' Pagoda in Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London. This architectural appropriation of the East after all took place in the heyday of Western imperialism in capital's 1st coming, when a self-assured European power could use the Other without compromising its own terms of definition and domination. The wholesale Chinese replication of British residential space in Capital's 2nd coming, however, cannot but betray a historical anxiety that has haunted the Chinese psyche since its fall from grace in the Opium Wars.



f. 2.9e



f. 2.9f

Not surprisingly, the St. Ewen imitation should become the iconic center for the Chinese newly-weds to consecrate their deep union and commemorate it in the shine of photo pages (f. 2.9e; f. 2.9f). The spectacle of Chinese agrarian aristocracy, nostalgically rekindled in museums and brought to life in old towns, finds its counterpart Occidental expression here. The asymmetrical relations of contact seem to remain this cultural symbolism. Yet, the site of appropriation and the subject that aggressively appropriates the soaring spire signal an unmistakable difference. The simulated St. Ewen is not the house of Christ imposed upon and erected by Euro-American missionaries. The cross on its top is too emptied of its religious significance as well as historical suggestions of conquest. The apparent house of worship and the Thames Town complex have become a new "empire of the signs" with which the new post-Deng Xiaoping China signifies to the world its unique cultural hybridity (Barthes). It is a culture desperately seeking fantasy over reality, surface over substance. The young people in front of the Thames Town church are akin to Barthes in Japan with a locational difference. They are locals turned tourists in their own country, natives alienated from their once familiar homeland in its ceaseless (de)constructions. In all

likelihood, they also share Barthes' dismissal of the Orient and Occident in their sedimented historical meanings and asymmetrical oppositions. For a people weighted down by historical traumas and encumbrances, to have a text without history, a signifier without the signified, has to be a pleasure in its own right.



f. 2.9g



f. 2.9h

One may reasonably argue that the reproduced things and settings of Thames Town, its statues of Shakespeare and Harry Potter, are eventually neither “fake” nor “bizarre” as generally reported in Western media (f.2.9g; f.2.9h). Rather, they are signs without meaning, providing for the visitors and outsiders an empty “platform,” to echo the most overused business jargon in China, to compose their “Chinese Dream” in order to own it. Objects and built environments have become blank slates upon which the aspirational residents today imagine their actual inhabitation of bourgeois kitsch, translating their present picturesque background into the forefront of their future lifestyle. Would the Chinese “ghost towns” of speculative and spectacular capital be unoccupied forever, their meanings unfulfilled and material value unrealized? One thing appears more certain: the apparition of an agrarian society and a sensibility rooted in extended families is bound to be exorcised.

III. Tianzifang (2007)

The Disneyfication of tradition and modernity in contemporary China is part of a grand global undertaking to transform former non-capitalist nation states into what Guy Debord identified and theorized half a century ago as *The Society of the Spectacle*. At the

time of the French Situationist's writing, it largely refers to national societies of the Euro-North-American West, where the spectacle is not simply "a collection of images." Rather, the society of spectacle personifies "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." Whether it is the monumentalization or museumification of Confucius, the reiteration of Chinese wedding rituals in red and gold, or an assimilation of white wedding of the West, "the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance" (Debord 12, 14). Historically speaking, the kind of mediated social relationship through images is no longer the exclusive domain of western culture per sé. It has been disseminated globally and incorporated locally in the 2nd coming of capital.

Intriguingly, the spectacular (de)construction of China's ancient and modern has its unique features. While the 2nd coming of capital manifests itself in Western states as "deregulation" of corporations, "disorganization" and dissolution of liberal democracy, it materializes in China through centralized party management (Offe; Lash and Urry). Capital development is both state controlled and state driven. Forty kilometers from Thames Town into the heart of Shanghai is "New Heaven and Earth" (新天地), Hong Kong and America funded, greased by the Shanghai municipal government, and completed in 2004.³ The area was best known as the sacred site for the 1st Congress of Chinese Communist Party (1921), where Mao allegedly escaped arrest from the backdoor of the stone vault style building (Shikumen/石库门), typical of Shanghai's alley architecture, as opposed to Beijing's Hudong (胡同). Today, the political symbol of CCP's founding is outshone and isolated beside the urban renewal project that gutted the original residences for fancy cafes, restaurants, Armani, Emporio, and Vivienne Tam. With its newly resurfaced façade, New Heaven and Earth attempts a nostalgic evocation of Shanghai's commercial flourish in Capital's 1st coming, which in fact never reached this neighborhood.

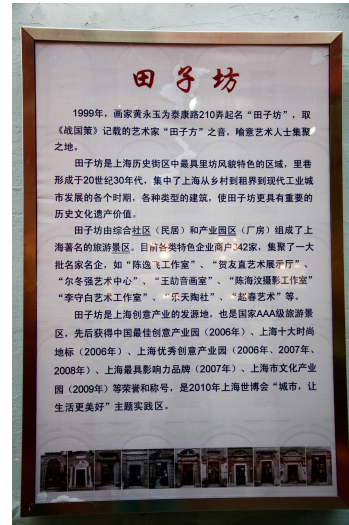
Not surprisingly, the success of its luxurious shopping and entertainment zone has spawned other copycats, the most notable of which is Tianzifang (田子坊), three kilometers or two subway stops away (F 3.1; 3.2). Ostensibly, this commercial conversion of that stone vault distinct blocks represents a bottom up popular entrepreneurialism, initiated by a name change in 1999 from "Lane 210 Taikang Road" into "Tianzifang." While alluding to a Confucian era term, "the gathering place of artists," it evokes the site's fame as an artist

³ "Shanghai's New Heaven and Earth." www.nytimes.com/2004/05/18/style/shanghais-new-heaven-on-earth.html

colony, led by Chen Yifei, a state sanctioned painter of “revolutionary realism” in 1970s. He made his renown and fortune in New York with his “romantic realism” in the 1980s and became a contract artist for the Hammer Galleries.⁴ In addition to mentioning its concession past in capital’s 1st coming, the glass encased description touts how Tianzifang’s vernacular architecture has made the neighborhood the birthplace of Shanghai’s “innovative industry,” rubbing off deliberately on the British “heritage industry.”



f. 3.1



f. 3.2

owes its to In Robert Hewison’s original coinage, “heritage industry” represents UK’s sanitization and commercialization of its royal history. It arises in the climate of Britain’s decline on the world stage, ceding its imperial power to the U.S. since WW2. For Hewison, such packaging of the past encapsulates a middle class nostalgia for a bygone golden age. The Confucian revival seems a similar mythmaking of China’s civilizational glory, mercilessly discredited and destroyed by capital’s 1st coming. But the analogy stops here. Contrary to U.K’s self-perceived sense of diminution, the creative (de)construction of “Thames Town,” “New Heaven and Earth,” as well as “Tianzifang” takes place precisely in China’s self-claimed “peaceful rise.” Nostalgia of heritage is not unique to the narrative of decline; it can be an equally valid cultural response to a geopolitical trajectory of ascent. An imagined homesickness for a better past serves for a psycho-social need of belonging just as it can make comfortable one’s settlement in a future yet unfolding.

In the case of Tianzifang, nostalgia of tradition takes the form of past tense perfect. As a quest for stability, the drastic (de)construction of tradition here addresses at least two

⁴ <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-chen-yifei.php>

waves of the migrations. First, it is the influx of mammoth rural labor to historical cities like Shanghai as a result of China's capitalist industrialization. Second, it is the smaller scale displacement of long time city residents by the army of petty merchants, the significant percentage of which are of agrarian origin. Though primarily turning a place of residence into a site of tourism, this commercial remaking of the historical place of dwelling also serves as an act of settlement for different kinds of people who frequent Tianzifang. For the new internal immigrants from the country to the city, or small city to the metropolis, picture taking of and in the refurbished narrow alleys is a way of inserting themselves into a Shanghai history other than their own, very much like the street traders who now open their stores and own a piece of Tianzifang's cramped corridors (F 3.3).



f. 3.3



f. 3.4

Whether or not that history is an assemblage of mere images, fresh layers of zigzagging grayish blue bricks against the tired red brick walls, or smells harvested by Demeter, New York, are perhaps of secondary importance. Meanings are almost always the consequence of contact, the intimate interaction between the place and the people. For this Chinese American participant observer who happens to have lived memory of the neighborhood, what is not retained or re-presented is the spilled-over sewage and the swat-only public restrooms. For a brand that specializes in everyday wearable odor for a "single note, linear-experience fragrance," the scent of magnolia alba—of the buds literally worn by local women prior to the Cultural Revolution—is a must chemical extraction, a practice not so different from Exxon or Shell Oil elsewhere in the world (F 3.4). When sold to Western tourists, the concentrated local flavor stands for Shanghai authenticity. For the new Chinese migrants who have made it in Shanghai it is a means through which they project themselves

into a historical olfactory pleasantry, devoid of the any pungency of human waste. “The past” may be “a foreign country,” but countries as a geopolitical legacy of nation-states building are becoming, in the sense of commodity circulation, a thing of foreign origin (Lowenthal). Personal memories are increasingly decentralized, detached from demarcated lands, familial folklores, and singular histories. For the just deracinated contemporary Chinese population, which would probably count as the majority, the loss of home and the sense of place entail some consumption of heritage products in order to overcome the felt crevice between their past and present.

I hesitate to condemn the sanitization of history in Tainzifang as nostalgia without history (Jameson). The desire channeled through things and services there is not “restorative nostalgia,” “a transhistorical reconstruction of a lost home” in terms of “truth and tradition.” Neither is it “reflective nostalgia” of the “longing self,” who appreciates the ambivalence of belonging yet “does not shy from the contradiction of modernity” (Boym xviii). Rather, Tainzifang nostalgia, like its sister Thames nostalgia, is a redacted homesickness of willful forgetting. It refuses to remember the all too painful successions of political movements and persecutions of the Mao era, and by extension, the vicious dynastic cycle that the Chinese people were unable to transcend. The longing is tasked to screen and select from an otherwise painful past, with which the present self is able to make peace with and purposefully possess. In the act of possession through commodity exchange is achieved a usable history and much needed stability, however momentary and precarious, that compulsory migration for survival and success has engendered. After all, as C. P. Macpherson has taught us, the emergence of capital is not possible without the historical production of a “self-possessive individual,” the sort of subject that owns oneself exclusively and conducts oneself in relation to others as a set of proprietary exchange. It is this practice of exchange, as Georg Simmel observes with incisiveness, that a “metropolitan individuality” comes into being. The inculcation of a self-possessive individual has been the indispensable task of capitalism, whether in its 1st or 2nd coming, rising or declining. When personal and historical memory can no longer be renewed by palpable contact and reinforced through face-to-face communities, they can and will have to be replaced by manufactured symbols.

The social space of Tianzifang is a neo-contact zone, let me revise Pratt’s notion of inevitable cultural clash and negotiation in capital’s 1st coming. In capital’s 2nd coming, however, the West’s coercive conquest in the original contact seems muted. This necessarily alters the relation between the ethnographic representation of metropolitan subjects and

the “auto-ethnographic” representation by the Other, who has to both accommodate the idioms of the conqueror and the speakers’ own community. Because the contact zone has become a new zone of competitive enterprise, the pitch of the self in sales is obligated to address their intended customers, be it local or global, with multicultural marketability.



f. 3.5



f. 3.6

For the Chinese nouveau riche who has the means to purchase and space to hang art, it entails a stereotyping of the West as either lissome or sumptuous butts, surplus sexuality without repression. Such open revue of the *jouissance* of the derrière would surely invite imprisonment if not public execution in the Mao era. At a time when sexuality of any form must be sublimated into passion for the great leader, its present translation into voyeuristic pleasure has to be considered progress towards political loosening and cultural liberalization, in sync with China’s GDP growth (f 3.5; 3.6). For the Western tourists whose bulging shopping bags may still have extra room, symbols of the Cultural Revolution also beckon. Beyond the residual residential alleys with overhead laundry, lined-up bikes, and bamboo scaffolds for further commercial expansion is the eye-catching advertisement for the eyes of English speakers only (f 3.7; 3.8; 3.9). “We have more old poster[s] and photo [s],” the promotional sign reads. What is not said is that “they are all fresh from the printing press,” cloned and re-purposed (f 3.8). Like Germans in Istanbul, treasure hunting for “antique rugs,” the intended Western customers for Cultural Revolution memorabilia have to regard it as classical “Chinese difference,” handed down from the Cold War and valuable for its limited editions. Little would they know that the grenades and canons, AK 47s and their bayonets were intended for and targeted at not only the Chinese “counter-revolutionaries” and “capitalist running dogs” but also the “big-nosed foreign imperialists” (f 3.8; 3.9). The once-upon-a time “propaganda art” is now the “art of the deal,” objects of unsuccessful persuasion turned into objects of successful seduction. It is a heritage industry

made in China and meant for the non-Chinese. It is a piece of Chinese history the Chinese does not want to keep and is too anxious not to ship across the Pacific.



f. 3.7



f. 3.8



f. 3.9

Of great fascination in Tianzifang's commercial production of collective memory is an unexpected and unapologetic inclusion of a slice of communist history that the official state discourse chooses not to commemorate. After all, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is a forbidden subject that demands misremembering. This misremembering is in fact the precondition for the state to link Mao's "long march" towards world communism to Deng's march toward global capitalism in a seamless developmental narrative, culminating in China's current material prosperity. The curious fact that Tianzifang's use of that history does not involve self-censor nor is it censored by the state incites interpretation.

We can hypothesize first that Tianzifang's representation of the Chinese revolution neither seriously challenges nor ideologically offends the party in the latter's explicit control of national history and revival of capitalism. Second, Tianzifang's figuration of the red star launches this most sanctimonious symbol of Chinese communism into an alternative orbit, away from the political and public stratosphere into the private sphere of popular leisure entertainment.

"The Revolution will not be Televised," declared Gil Scott-Heron for Black Power, when the sun of Mao still hung high in the sky.⁵ It must be revised in post-Mao China, however. History and heritage retrofitted, the red star marches off the map of the Chinese long march canvass bag onto the canvass bag featuring Donald Duck, just "to serve the

⁵ For Scott-Heron's lyric, see: <https://www.google.com/search?q=lyrics+the+revolution+will+not+be+televised&oq=lyric+the+revolution+wil+not&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0.9942j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

people,” so claims the caption (f. 3.9a). Service to the people would indeed stimulate domestic consumption in a global economy, as exhorted by the West and encouraged by the Chinese leadership. It is only logical then that the red star should also occupy the center of the Cultural Revolutionary looking tin mugs, presently “devoted to my most virile husband” and “for a one night stand, inclusive of breakfast” (f 3.9b). Finally, if the indelible yet inedible sign on the canvass bags and tin mugs is gastronomically unsatisfactory, there is always the uniformed revolutionary chef to serve you, not retro leather belts or organic weeds, but delectable delicacies appropriate for neo-revolutionary times (f 3.9c).



f 3.9a



f 3.9b



f 3.9c

I find such wedding of communist history to capitalist market surprising, for it offers a rare glimpse of the overall state tolerance for the folk appropriation of what used to be its exclusive domain of truth and tradition. Unlike Thames Town and New Heaven and Earth, where antiseptic construction of luxurious residences and shopping revues leaves little of historical traces, the messy and middle-brow remake of Tianzifang betrays an apparently more organic, more popular, and more light-hearted evocation of history's fragments. It defies the state's monopoly, showing that the meanings of tradition and heritage are never inherent but subject to social contestation (Smith). No less commercial, the humor inscribed on objects for sale spurs harmless consumption, enabling a not altogether unhealthy amnesia about Cultural Revolution's trauma and suffering. Here history of the most painful and violent kind is reprocessed through ironic detachment and bourgeois Dada. There is no denying Debord's insight that the society of spectacle—of which China is the late and admittedly distinctive specimen—sustains its own regime of representation through the cycle of endless desire production and consumption. It is also true that Tianzifang's use of local and national history approximates what Fredric Jameson describes, in the spirit of Debord and his fellow countryman Jean Baudrillard, as “fashion

plate” or “nostalgic deco.” However, as I hope to demonstrate it is precisely in the plethora of images and theaters that a new contact zone of the post-communist everyday has emerged. This is the social space within which party ideology and popular consumption achieves imperfect mediation and through which one may discover the limited possibility of difference if not dissidence. Tianzifang appears to have articulated a longing without the intent of actual historical retrieval, a homesickness readily dissipated via commodity fetish and oblivion.

IV. Chengdu: Under the New Freeways

As it hopefully becomes evident by now, my interpretation of China’s (de)construction of the urban and the rural, the ancient and the modern, resonate with Raymond Williams’ preoccupation with the dynamic process of cultural change and Michel de Certeau’s interest in the everyday use of social space. It is well known that Williams classifies culture in a continuum of the “dominant,” the “residual,” and the “emergent.” Though he never exactly spelled out what “the dominant” is, we can safely assume it in our history of the present to be the global culture of capitalism. The “residual” is not the “archaic,” always already made obsolete by capital. Rather, it is that which left over from pre-capitalist cultures, embedded in religion and rural ways of life that industrial capitalism has not yet wiped out. In this context, the “emergent” of Williams refers to remnant cultures within the dominant culture of contemporary capitalism that have the potential of being recreated as resistance or alternatives. With his own terms, on the other hand, de Certeau concerns himself equally with capital and state’s dominant role in shaping space and making culture. Instead of focusing on the “strategies” with which these institutions, state or municipality, corporations or proprietors, organize social life in the built environment, he undertakes the job of revealing the “tactics” ordinary people use to reclaim their individual autonomy and mobility. Sunning your comforters in Thames Town can be seen either as a cultural residual a la Williams or a subconscious tactic, according to de Certeau, to resist the designated meanings and utilizations of a Tudor replica.

Let us turn to the scenes under the just cured concrete freeways in Chengdu, first of all, to tease out the dynamic interaction between the shakers and movers of Chinese urban space and their intended and unintended users. Second, in the process of reading the captures of human traffic or the absence thereof we shall also productively engage both

Williams and de Certeau's insight. While the state and capital's creative (de)construction of traditional geography in China often takes the form of epic uprooting of rural populations and demolition of older urban neighborhoods, the freeways that network through historical cities are often elevated to minimally accommodate existing structures (f 4.1). This elevated thoroughfare channels commerce and motion of people above the streets. It also inadvertently creates spatial surplus of capital flow for the masses. In the case of Los Angeles or Bronx such space can be home for the overnight homeless, while in Hong Kong, they can be the Sunday gathering place of Filipino nannies or domestic helpers.

I am not interested in the drivers on the highways and the drivers who have designed them. Nor am I interested in the spaces underneath that the state and/or the municipality deliberately outfit in the style of classic Chinese architecture. They impress the onlookers as if Chinese freeways of modernity rest on the shoulders of its ancient tradition, inscribed with poetry by Li Shimin, the second and most sagacious emperor of the historically prosperous Tang Dynasty (f.4.2). Whether the president of the People's Republic today is a modernized version of the wise and benevolent ruler needs no clarification for a cultural consciousness noted for its comprehension of allusions.



f 4.1



f 4.2

What captured my attention were the scenes from downstairs, less the small business people who have also seized the space to profit from gentrification and to revive such leisure venues as the tea house than the often unacknowledged ordinary weavers of city tapestry, whose actions are practical and performative but non-profitable in the language of business (f 4.3). These people are the spontaneous "operators," to borrow De Certeau's term, against the dominant urban discourse that isolates, interconnects, and stabilizes properties of the city. In my view, the conduct of these operators below the highway both exceeds and escapes the controlling and coherent narrative of urbanism. It represents the mass's claim of spaces beyond the confines of their cramped existence,

converting the unnamed corridors left over by centralized and proprietary development into extensions of their everyday living.



f 4.3



f 4.4

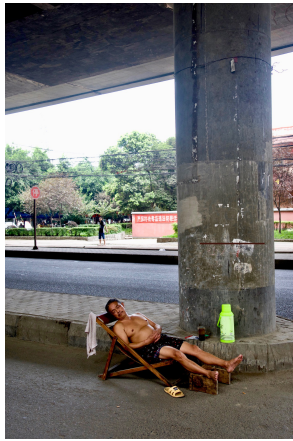


f 4.5

Thus, we bear witness on a hot summer day when the residents of the congested and not yet razed dwellings in the neighborhood occupy the streets below and act out their everyday living beyond the control of capital and state. There is an independent barber serving his client and retired men on their bamboo stools, fanning and cooling themselves, doing nothing in particular nor productively (f. 4.4; f 4.5.). As we turn to face the sidewalks, we see a topless man, dozing off on his wooden lounge chair, feet on his wooden footrest (f 4.6). Not far away is a gathering of three generations, toddler on her mom's lap with grandmother nearby, enjoying their family time indifferent to the car whipping by (f 4.7). At the other end of the highway there is a congregation of Majiang players enlivening the nowhere of the concrete highway and transforming its anonymity into a place of grass-root entertainment.

De Certeau lauds the "tactics" of French pedestrians who defy the panoptic and geometric "strategies" aimed both to produce and discipline city space and its denizens. Their itinerant movements stand for him "an individual mode of reappropriation" from below that suspect and upset "the collective mode of administration" from the top (96). If the language of traffic control is totalizing, the speech act of the walker is an act of liberation. De Certeau's celebrated pedestrian is not exactly the flâneur of Baudelaire, a bourgeois poet wanderer or an impoverished rag-picker whom Walter Benjamin considers central to process the refuse of Parisian modernity. His affirmation of passages over and against placement, routes against rootedness, however, implies a return to private and

perambulatory agency. The Chinese subjects under the freeways of Chengdu and their spatial practices are remarkably incompatible with De Certeau's idealizations.



f 4.6



f 4.7



f 4.8

Rather than individualizing spatial appropriation and consumer autonomy, the people taking momentary possession of the highways' basement, if you will, are reasserting the kind of civic and non-commercial use of public infrastructure, before the Chinese communist constitution recognizes the right of its citizens to private property. Their usage of street space is distinct from the practices in the underground arcades, boutiques, and restaurants of Shanghai's subways, for example, which only realize the official objective of facilitating atomic subjects both for the traffic of commerce and to convenience the frictionless flow of capital. Under the freeways of the populous and provincial Chengdu, the speed of travel is beside the point while the stability of dwelling concerns all. The occupation of the freeway's underbelly seems an involuntary human spillover from cramped residences. It is definitely not a flash mob, the spuriously spontaneous coming-together to compensate for the actual loss of communities. Neither is the assemblage ruled by the speed of ephemeral entertainment. Time spent here is non-productive and non-profitable in the dominant language of commodity exchange, efficiency and material prosperity. These are the domains of the rumbling business above their heads. It is in the slow time of napping, cooling, and gameplay that the silent phantoms of the residual sneak in from the backdoor, not nostalgically but tangibly. This is reclamation of familial and communal time/space that the highways of progress have endangered, if not entirely erased.

In Raymond Williams' s dialectic conception of culture, "the residual" could be potentially turned into "the emergent" and even achieve the possible position of "the dominant." The "operators" under the highways of Chengdu, to reiterate and revise De Certeau's key term, could then signify not so much the helpless disposables of capitalist progress but the forerunners of a less oppressive communitarianism, Confucian or communist, than Chinese history has seen. With such optimism of the will, one could even contend that the collective manner in which the young couples are assembled and the wedding photos taken at Thames Town are also enunciations of "the residual," resurrected from either Confucian or Pre-Deng Xiaoping socialist times. The posing is an en masse performance, despite its apparent individualist manifestations. The communal and shared spatial utilization below the highways qualifies as a class specific "residual" practice against structural domination and discipline. Both could account for a "habitus," in view of Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, "dispositions" internalized from an earlier cultural environment and translated into present practice.

Williams and De Certeau's optimistic view of subjective intervention against given social positions and structures is the kind of "invention," a popular as opposed to the top-down state and capital (de)construction, which Bourdieu would realistically set "within limits." We may want to ask what will happen if the aspirational residents today have become the actual owners of the British cottages and Tudor houses in Thames Town (f. 2.5; 2.6). What will happen to the folks of congested living, who have made liberal and practical use of the highways' underbelly, when they begin to occupy the high-rise apartments behind the rubbles, insulated from the noise of their neighbors and looking at the world with aerial views (f.2.1; 4.1)? Whether the residual disposition from an historical antecedent can continue to survive and enact in everyday practice—when the habitat of its cultivation and reproduction is being decimated—is not a question we have easy answers but a question that we should persistently raise.

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